

USAID Office of Food for Peace Strategy Consultations

Social Protection and Safety Nets

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Disclaimer: *These notes do not necessarily reflect the views of the USAID Office of Food for Peace (FFP) or The TOPS Program. Various stakeholders' views are reflected in the notes.*

Introduction: Framing Presentation

Social protection aims to *protect* the chronically poor, *prevent* the vulnerable from being decimated by shocks, and *promote* livelihoods of those with the capacity to work (the 3 Ps). Social protection is a broad concept seeking to address risk, vulnerability, inequality, and poverty through a system of transfers. It can be categorized into two main areas of effort: 1) social assistance, which includes cash transfers, school feeding, targeted food assistance, and subsidies; and 2) social insurance, such as pensions, disability, assistance for surviving spouses, and unemployment insurance. Our work as FFP and partners tends to revolve around social assistance, which is where we find safety nets. Whether we are working in humanitarian or development contexts, our focus is on the most vulnerable.

Social safety nets tend to have limited (or no) conditionality attached, which makes them a non-contributory transfer program. While recipients may need to attend school or participate in a work project to receive benefits, they are not required to contribute their own resources.

Effective safety nets are linked to resilience to help individuals and households make productive investments and manage risk. Ideally, safety net programs are sustainable, equitable in providing benefits, adequate and appropriate, cost-effective, incentive-compatible (supporting not undermining other systems), and responsive to changes. It is hard for any individual program to reach all of these ideals, but they are important guideposts we should be striving for.

FFP tends to play a few key roles, including strengthening the capacity of government whenever we can and coordinating key actors either as lead or coordinating partner. In some contexts we ourselves deliver programs where needs dictate. So, we need to think through how to do so in a way that supports the systems we are working in without creating disincentives for national or local actors to do that work themselves.

Brainstorming Session

Identify the range of potential roles for FFP Programs in both direct delivery or in strengthening systems at both the local/community and national levels.

National-Level Social Protection Systems

- Pilot programs provide an opportunity to model a strong example for the national government. This can create buy-in for and awareness around the benefits of starting a safety net program, as well as increasing knowledge around how it can be done well.

- Strengthening the capacity of governments also can develop through bringing in and making linkages with external expertise, improving policy, strengthening capacity for M&E, data utilization and program adaptation, strengthening budgeting capacities for better resource allocation, and improving targeting of the most vulnerable.
- Another area for strengthening the capacity of governments relates to community engagement. Households do not always understand who is qualified for the safety net. Governments need to build capacity to know how to engage households and be transparent about what the government is doing, why, and who is eligible.
- FFP plays a role in donor coordination, not necessarily leading it, but participating in coordination efforts and, in all cases, being aware and not working at odds with others. This kind of donor coordination also can include sharing evidence and data across donors and partners.
- Promoting local procurement opportunities is important.
- FFP has a role within the U.S. Government to explain the role of safety nets to the USAID Bureau of Food Security and other U.S. Government agencies because there is a lack of understanding about how safety nets/social protection can be a tool. Strengthening social protection systems is a job bigger than FFP can take on alone, and we have to get other parts of the government on board and involved.
- If we know registries are available or social protection programs are already occurring in a country, there are opportunities to link to those systems when a rapid onset emergency occurs.
- We should engage with the World Food Programme, understand where it is headed, and learn from and influence multilateral organizations.
- Provide financial resources where necessary.

Community-Level or Traditional Social Protection Systems

- Strong roles at the community level could be in incentivizing participation in social protection programs and in identifying gaps where the most vulnerable are being excluded or missed.
- An in-depth anthropological study or other form of contextual analysis is needed because of the layering of reciprocal obligations and power structures and relationships. We do not know about these when we go in but risk doing more harm than good. This concept links to the previous week's session on social accountability. The implementer and local government need to be listening and responding. This can help us to make sure that dignity is preserved and local cultures are respected.
- It is important to not only understand the local dynamics, but we also need to leave space for updating our understanding so that we are looking at whether we are affecting and how we are affecting those dynamics.
- We need to empower the community to understand and articulate what they need instead of importing ideas from elsewhere. Trust in the community is important. Engaging local leaders, teachers, doctors, and religious leaders is one way to empower and build trust.

- At any level we always have to aim for programming that empowers women, does not undermine women, and does not promote/foster/enable gender inequitable dynamics. However, it goes beyond gender; vulnerable groups and individuals must be brought in to the conversation to ensure that their needs are being met and whether systems are equitable.
- Another role is to help communities understand where other resource linkages exist.
- Environmental impact also should be a focus in order to ensure environmentally sensitive programs.

Small Group Work on Three Contextual Models

FFP works in a wide range of environments, from disasters in the Philippines to areas of recurrent crisis to more stable but still fragile contexts. How we engage is different from one place to another and often depends on the capacities of the governments and the level of crisis. These are three models we consider, with many countries exhibiting traits from more than one model, depending on geography or specific dimensions of our work.

- **Constrained model:** Humanitarians are severely limited by domestic actors, governments, and others perpetuating conflict and/or actively restricting the delivery of aid. There are things we can do, but we are limited. We have to consider what we can do and whether a safety net is even possible. If we feel it is, we need to consider how we go in and how we operate in that environment.
- **Comprehensive model:** Humanitarians attempt to strategically and operationally substitute for internal safety nets due to the inability of government and local actors. In this case we often take on the role of direct service delivery because the government cannot offer any services, despite relative stability. We need to carefully consider entry, ultimate exit strategies, and what we want to achieve in the long run. We do not want to indefinitely be providing assistance that the government is responsible for providing.
- **Cooperative model:** Humanitarians work in close collaboration with domestic and civil society actors, seeking to facilitate rather than deliver service. This is an ideal for us. We would be complementing other programs, such as government, local community, and other NGO programs.

Small groups talked about these models to identify ways that these contexts might shape what we can and should do, understanding not all things are possible for every program and in every context.

Responses from the Small Group Work

General Considerations

- How can we support countries to move toward the collaborative model? This would mean first understanding where the country is and a path for it to move forward. Some countries are in between models. We need to understand where a country is in relation to where we want to see it. Similarly, sometimes one country exhibits a combination of the models. A country may have a safety net program but have large gaps in reaching people.
- It may not always be appropriate to think of social protection programming in every context. We need to think about cost effectiveness and looking at cost per beneficiary levels. The level of need is

not always the same and we should be looking at the root causes of the need and whether social protection can help create space to address those root causes.

- Sustainability is an issue, and if we cannot identify some path forward for future sustainability we need to consider whether the work is appropriate.
- Government buy-in is the fundamental first step in national safety net systems.
- FFP and its partners have been doing some form of social protection. The question is looking at what FFP already has done and how it can be applied to different types of contexts. Looking at the three models is a helpful step to identify constraints and where some program elements may be replicable in other contexts.

Constrained Model

- Targeting the most vulnerable, rather than providing more general distributions, can be a real focus.
- With the breakdown in social order inherent in this context, it is important to look at how we can build on existing systems in our general work.
- This context requires us to be opportunistic. We need to be flexible and adaptable when identifying actors and situations that can be capitalized on. We also need to look for possible activities that may be less comprehensive than in other environments but much more about understanding the strengths even in the most constraining environments and about filling gaps in reaching the more vulnerable or specific program elements that are neglected.
- In a constrained environment we need to think more about the community side of it. There may be very little government input. At the minimum we need to make sure we are not undermining systems in place and we need to engage in some way, especially during emergency response. Civil society may be the best possible source for handover.

Comprehensive Model

- Compared to the other two models, the comprehensive model holds unique risks and complexity. Transition strategies are needed. Moving from full service delivery to activities to help create a system is important but complex. What is the timeline for phasing out and turning over responsibilities? What are the capacities that need to be built?
- There are more opportunities in the comprehensive model if timelines for social protection in emergencies are increased beyond 6–12 months. More time enables quality assessments and analyses, as well as coordination and linking with government systems. Instead of funding ending after 1 year in emergency situations, investment into a handover to community or government actors should be considered, if money is available.
- Sometimes the decision to proceed on a comprehensive basis may be more inherently political. Since we cannot provide comprehensive social protection in every situation and it may be so difficult to extract ourselves, there may need to be larger overriding commitments beyond humanitarian concerns to countries and response to a particular crisis that guide the commitment to

comprehensive delivery. We need to examine objectives and be clear on criteria, i.e., under what conditions and capacities we will engage in this type of social protection.

Collaborative Model

- FFP is not working in many situations where the collaborative model exists. By definition, this model is going to be in place more often in middle income countries. However, Ethiopia bears some elements of the collaborative model, as do Central American countries.
- FFP is such an operational entity that perhaps the best of what it may be able to deliver is expertise and systems strengthening. Traditionally, this kind of systems strengthening is more the work of other entities in USAID and the U.S. Government. Yet no one is talking in a sophisticated way about social protection and safety nets within the U.S. Government, except FFP.
- In this context, safety nets are about more than food; they are about livelihoods and contributing to the larger household economy. However, within USAID people still think FFP just focuses on food. We have a role to play, especially in Ethiopia, in the design and implementation of the programs. Within USAID and USDA, we need to further roll out social protection programs. We have a strong role to play, but it needs to grow and not only be FFP's initiative.

Discussion Questions for Group Work

1. Transition: Rather than simply transfer resources over a fixed period of time, we should be striving to strengthen social protection systems that will bring long-term potential for transformation. What transition strategies can be put into place that will allow us to integrate social protection into local systems to ensure lasting impact beyond the timeframe of our programs?

- We have an opportunity to improve exit strategies, especially in talking about sustainability. Similar to a business plan, how will the safety net be handed over to local leadership?
- From the design stage, we need to think about how programming will end (exit strategy). We need to look at the range of possibilities, based on government capacity, to continue the program. In the planning stage, it is important to understand gaps (financial, other capacity) and ensure the program has some type of plan to address the gaps with staff training. This includes building databases and targeting systems and building capacity around these essential elements in transition.
- Government buy-in is essential to a smooth transition. So, FFP programming needs to demonstrate impact to help justify to the government why this investment is important. Pilots allow us to demonstrate impact and how the systems work. When we do pilots we need to show cost effectiveness.
- FFP can explore pilot approaches using local procurement as a tool for investment. Transparency and efficiency should be demonstrated with local procurement. Gradual transfer of responsibilities should take place.

- Determining valid graduation criteria will help make clear that some percentage of the population in safety nets will shrink if other aspects of social promotion are effective.
- Another model for transition is that the donor provides 100% support, which then reduces to 80% and on and on at pre-negotiated points.
- Getting the government to actively participate in these systems is challenging. As NGO capacity has increased, the government role has decreased. It is right to get the right incentives in place so the government feels ownership and responsibility from the start.

2. Complementary Programs: Can synergies be created between social protection activities and our work in other sectors? Do complementary activities have the potential to increase the impact of social protection programs? If so, how, and do some activities have more potential than others?

Conversely, can social protection strengthen the impact of our work in other sectors? If so, how, and is this particularly true in some sectors more than others or with some social protection interventions?

- Do complementary systems exist? Yes, there are examples from health programming. When there are reliable transfer systems in place, you can create conditionalities around vaccinations and school feeding programs (the most well-known type of social safety net). It depends what is trying to be achieved and the context.
- Complementarities could also revolve around other systems, such as supply chain or other management systems, like predicting stock outages. So a question is, how well is the system functioning for delivery?
- Some systems have more potential than others. Enhancing compliance with conditional transfers, increasing incomes, increasing household dietary diversity, and the need to monitor for results and impact are all factors to examine.
- Is there the political will to continue funding these programs? Community-based and traditional systems are being broken down by climate change and conflict in many contexts. How do we verify benefits (such as crop insurances)? Village savings and loans are useful for individual crises, but in larger crises, when the entire community is affected, village savings and loans are not as useful. Some activities could be nationalized, but we need to see if this is beneficial or repetitive.
- Can synergies be created? Yes. If complementary activities reduce the underlying risk and vulnerability creating the need for social protection in the future we should encourage them. Small-scale activities show some behavior change. The very vulnerable cannot think about development opportunities when trying to think of immediate needs. They will not take risks (e.g., why invest in agriculture when the members of the household need to eat?). Social protection creates the safe space for people to take risks and invest in development opportunities.

- 3. Do no harm: Social protection takes many forms, from the national to the local, including traditional support mechanisms that help vulnerable groups through times of crisis. With the influx of resources from international food assistance, there is a potential to undermine traditional schemes. How can we ensure that the social protection interventions and programs we directly support will, in turn, enhance and support traditional or other community-level safety nets? How can we best understand the traditional systems in place and shape our programs accordingly to support, not duplicate or diminish the potential of what is already there?**
- We need to be realistic with overall risk management. What are the irreparable levels of harm to be avoided? And, which are repairable over the course of the program timeframe that will respond to interventions that we can identify and learn more about through feedback mechanisms? Patience is needed to identify issues. We need to identify populations and the power dynamics surrounding them, and design appropriate solutions.
 - It is important to have ground truthing and identify vulnerable populations that may not be initially identified. Assessments needed to support program design need to be context-specific. Even with a quick analysis some of these key issues can be identified. When the program launches, clear messaging to the beneficiary population is needed.
 - Who FFP decides to partner with influences who will be impacted. We need to ensure local partners have the capacity to do the program.
 - Reporting is not a one-off aspect. An open continuous feedback loop is needed. This links back to risk management to make sure we have mechanisms in place to identify risks and the appropriate response. An open culture is needed to discuss these elements and non-desired program results.

Group Discussion Elements of Success

- We also need to learn from failures. We do not need to call them failures, but perhaps programs that did not work out as intended. Either way, FFP wants to hear about these lessons.
- In thinking about Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme, the food/cash transfer component has gone far to rehabilitate landscapes. Previously degraded land, such as watersheds, has been rehabilitated.
- Success is gained where the government works collaboratively, throughout design and implementation, observing, and facilitating transfer of responsibility to people on the ground. A combination of leadership, community, skill, and capacity building is needed.
- Exit strategies need to be there from the beginning and designed and implemented in collaboration with the government and the communities themselves.
- Continued training and volunteering from communities are other components of success. Once the skills are acquired, minimal further support is needed. In the very early days of the safety net, one key activity was cross visits; sharing by visiting was useful.

- The best programs are those run by communities because a community knows if a situation is going to work for them or not. Community training and buy-in is crucial. When they own it they retain it, look after it, benefit, and share. There are many models for user groups that collect fees for maintenance and management of infrastructure. On the other hand, when they do not have ownership, communities let structures fall apart.
- To have ownership, communities need to figure out what they want. Interventions need to be culturally appropriate, necessary, and beneficial to the community. Helping communities learn how to assess needs and meet those needs is important.
- The link between social protection and social accountability is crucial.